

Life's Essentials: A Developmental Approach

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Prologue:

The essence of this essay is simple: each of us has to learn to stand on our own two feet and to have a sense of belonging to someone or something. Both agendas must be fulfilled within the context of daily life, as we know it: its customs, its financial requirements, and its social structures. Thirdly, these two abilities- to function autonomously and to make rewarding affiliations- develop in the individual over time beginning in the first year of life and they are marked by developmental milestones. They are also complementary in that achievement of autonomous milestones make possible healthy and rewarding affiliations and vice versa.

My own understanding of these ideas is informed by my own experience of a childhood of privilege, private education, and parental emotional and financial support. While every family has its idiosyncrasies that are driven by the health of the marriage, as well as the individual habits and predispositions of individuals within the family system, families of means and prominence have two characteristics that distinguish them from others. Money and fame enable families to tie their offspring to them. Money and fame also offer opportunities (read: rocket fuel) to have all sorts of experiences that can enhance a life or create many unhappy unintended consequences.

I write this essay in the first person because, first of all, it applies to me and to the principles that guide me everyday. Secondly, the first person avoids the awkwardness of using "he" or "she". To use "one" makes the text seem too philosophical for the practical usefulness I hope to offer. Finally, the first person offers the immediacy of the personal, which invites you, the reader, to remember your own difficult journey from childhood to maturity and apply these principles to your life and to thinking about the people you care about.

The Early Years:

A child, as I was many years ago, rich or poor, is born entirely dependent on my primary affiliation: the parents and other the caregivers. I can help these caregivers by crying out, sucking in nourishment, and sleeping in a cooperative manner with those who hear my cries and provide me sustenance, warmth, and cleanliness.

As time passes with the regular sharing of these rituals of connection, I slowly develop a sense of familiarity and love for these people, places, and things along with a sense of trust that there is a permanence and safety in the belonging to this assembly.

* **Special thanks** to Barbara Culver for editorial advice that is integral to my current thinking.

These are my people!

Simultaneously, my awareness that I have some separate agendas from these caregivers also slowly develops. The word “no” is the beginning of this autonomy. “No, I do not want to be picked up [or put down]”. “No, I do not want to suck any more or be left with a discomfort in my tummy”. This “no” should not be thought of as a negation of anything or anyone, but rather the first inklings that I aspire to a separate identity: my “me”.

Eventually, this separate self learns to master skills that bring joy to me and hopefully to the people I belong to. Starting with such things as eye contact and sitting up, which bring universal delight, there are other activities driven by my curiosities that can bring displeasure to people who wish to protect me, let alone wishing that I would sleep through the night, be quiet, and not question parental authority.

The early years are driven by the coordinated efforts of my parents, my teachers, and me to develop mastery, a pedigree that gets harder and harder to achieve as life continues and the bar for “mastery” gets set higher. I learn to laugh, reach, walk, run, ride a bike, etc. Cognitively, I eventually achieve the ability to make meaning of words and numbers. I develop a separate identity this way. I also belong to my family and community through the shared language, values, and skills I have mastered. I choose my own way when I say, “no.” I belong by saying, “yes” to “my people.” See DIAGRAM 1 attached.

If only it were just that simple: if only I could individuate with my own opinions and join the group that is easy to say “yes” to, where my integrity is never compromised. This isn’t even likely when I am two years old, even if I am the most loving kid I can be. For example, it is an important task for my family and teachers to crash in on my agendas when I am a danger to myself or another.

The process of child development is more like bumper cars. This can be quite fun for all as long as no one gets carried away with frustration and resulting attacks on my autonomy. The most common problematical message that I hear all too often that I am being “selfish.” This can be very confusing as it is exactly my job as a child to develop a self. The next diagram points to the dilemma. Do I go my own way and sometimes get perceived as selfish or do I comply with rules of my clan in order to avoid conflict even when it compromising my fledgling integrity? See DIAGRAM 2 attached.

Too often the message is that, in order to belong to this clan, I must think or do thus and so. Needless to say, it is probably healthier in the long run to develop a family culture that celebrates and tolerates individual difference. Sigmund Freud, however, pointed out in one of his last writings that civilization can only tolerate so much “discontent”. Families are generally the same way.

The good news is that usually most families and their children can find ways to work this out! About the age of eight most children realize that it is in my selfish interest for you to have a good time when we play together. By then, hopefully, I will have developed an immature but genuine capacity for empathy and I can begin to search for mutually agreeable outcomes. I share my toys. I let you decide some of the rules of the game that we co-create. Eventually I learn to detect consensus and I prefer it as an outcome rather than simply having my way, even when I still think “I am right”! See DIAGRAM 3 attached.

In this diagram we can see the beginnings of the balancing act all must learn if there is to be both willing cooperation and genuine personal integrity. The task of any affiliative community is to create an inclusive family culture and sense of friendship that has harmonies and disharmonies, which are “all part of the fun,” even as it is sometimes uncomfortable as we bump into each other.

The Power of Love:

The creation of a healthy family culture is activated by the tasks of everyday through which I interact with you. This culture is then fueled by the thoughts and emotions I experience as I go along each day and throughout my life. To illustrate I offer a counter-intuitive principle that I learned in a yoga class: **Action Creates Energy**. Action may take energy and initiative but when we are talking about the emotional vitality it takes to climb to maturity, I must get myself started and eventually I discover that my action invigorates and inspires me to act further. It is even more enlivening when I feel connected to the family members I am interacting with. To discover how I best connect with you brings joy to me and hopefully to you.

However, As I learn to enjoy the challenges of getting along and learning new things everyday, I must avoid the pitfall that has become a problem of epidemic proportions in our time: depression and the experience of helplessness, that nothing I can try will make any difference. The principle applies here: When I take an authentic action that I have authored, I create energy that I can then bring to you, thus creating a dynamic and mutually energizing interaction with you. Depression is the withdrawal of my energy from you and life itself. At this point any action I undertake becomes hard, if not impossible. Sometimes it becomes too hard to go forward and an emotional disability that feeds on itself takes hold. I go deeper and deeper into a depression or an addiction that seems to grip body and mind. In the diagram, I fall down the funnel and find myself in the under belly of this autonomy and affiliation dynamic. See DIAGRAM 4 attached.

Families and individuals that find themselves falling down usually have problems on both sides of this diagram. The individual belief is often that “I am powerless” and “nothing I try will succeed”. Tragically, there is also the exception of addiction in all its forms. The actively using addict fulfills the grandiose notion that “I am taking care of myself with the self-medication that helps me cope”. No one sets out to become an addict, depressive, or codependent! Addiction and depression may be thought of as completely ineffective coping mechanisms with both psychological and biological roots. They are a disease process like

any other. They may even have worked at certain points as solutions to impossible conditions in my life.

Eventually unintended negative consequences to myself and to people I care about overwhelm any benefit from the autonomy I have created for myself. It is not an overstatement to suggest that addiction and depression reflect a bankruptcy of the autonomous impulse. I cannot simply do my own thing and expect that this will be fine with my loved ones who are thinking that I am falling apart.

In reaction to the drama of my extreme autonomy and the collapse of vitality on both sides of the diagram, my loved ones worry about me, rationalize the situation, or ignore me. In all three cases, both the family and I are ignoring the possibility of collaborating and developing a family culture where I can find resilience within myself and we can cooperate together with passion, integrity and purpose. Activating this turn-around begins with both the depressive/ addict and the people that care about me each asking for help and making choices that reflect both personal and collective passion, integrity, and purpose as shown in the next diagram. See DIAGRAM 5 attached.

First, notice the top lines in this diagram. When I operate in my full autonomy, I choose who I affiliate with, except in the case of my family of origin. Although many people in an achievement-oriented society choose a highly valued conquest rather than a good and compatible fit, life works best when my affiliative choices choose me back. While personal energy is essential to moving into full autonomy and affiliation, this energy must ultimately drive healthy choices.

If there is one fundamental driver for any healthy relationship or career, it is that this person or career I chose reciprocates with their choice of me. For example, I might choose to become a rocket scientist out of genuine fascination, but rocket science would not choose me back if I do not have the math skills for it in the 21st century. Tragically, many individuals pursue intimate relationships and even friendships as achievements, barely even considering whether you choose me too.

The Mature Self:

Families do not have such a luxury as choice. Persons are born, adopted, and married into and out of families. Choice thus becomes a term that is moderated by “the serenity to accept the things I cannot change.” This is where the next stage of this diagram becomes essential: respect and self-respect. First and foremost, as a mature person, I respect the choices and opinions of others and I have the self-respect to know my own preferences and I have become able to speak up for them and act on them. See DIAGRAM 6 attached.

Respect is a notion that is often misunderstood. It does not mean addressing the other person with awe or deference. Broken down to its Latin roots, “spectare” is to see someone and “re”ferencing off of what you see and hear. For example, respecting a child is

to use language that the child can understand and with a voice tone and eye contact that connects with that child rather than a voice or look which intimidates that child.

Respect, in the context of the diagram, is recognizing each individual in their unique individuality of tastes, experiences, and beliefs. I dialogue with you, each of us looking for mutual understanding and acceptance of similarities and differences. I find pleasure in your company as we dialogue and of course, I hope you find pleasure in mine.

The Curious Self:

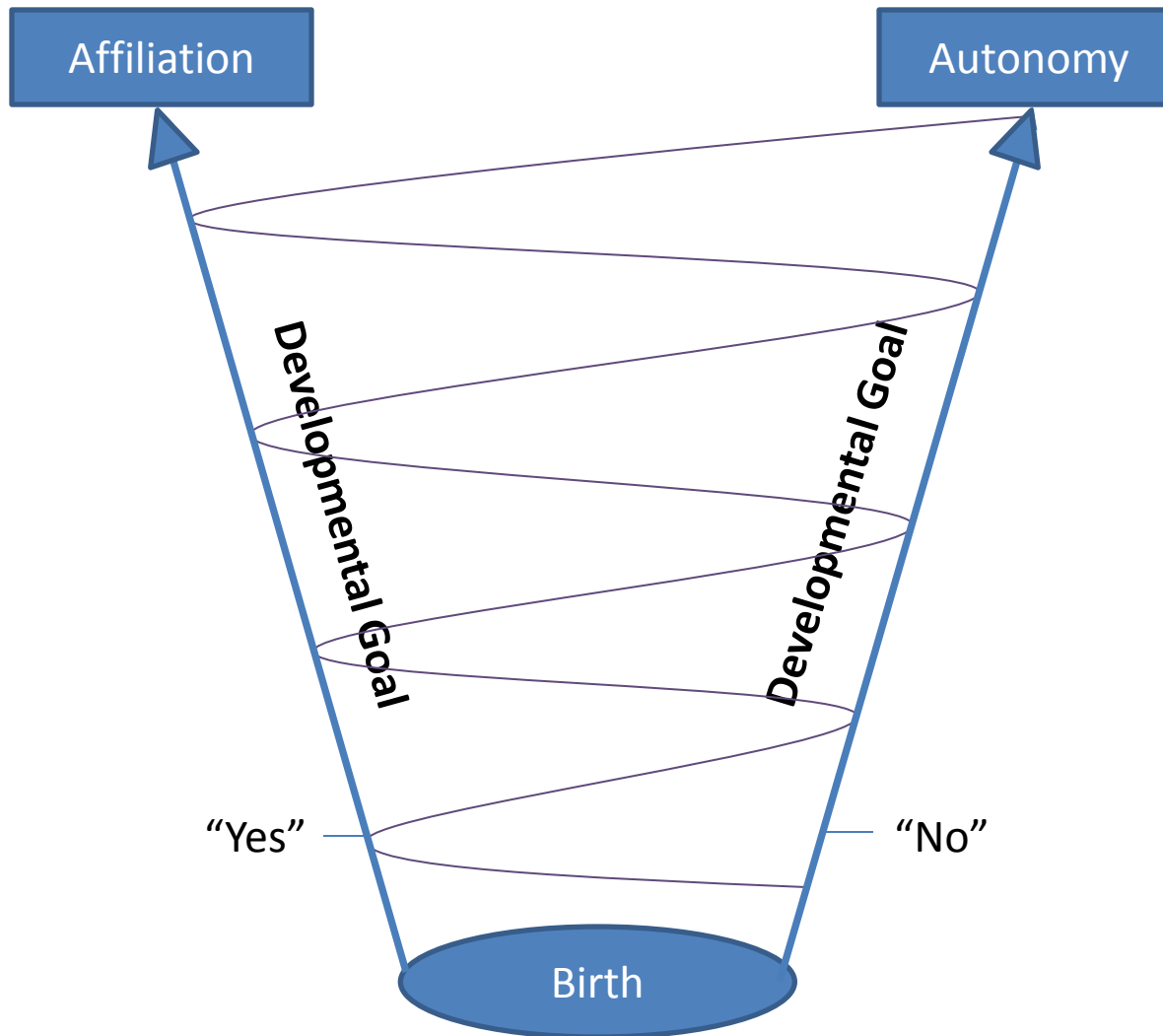
It is important to recognize at this stage of development that each family or other affiliation has more or less tolerance for diversity and disagreement. Most families function more fluidly when there is greater tolerance of difference, where “intelligent people can disagree” and dialogue is oriented toward mutual understanding rather than winning a debate and ‘being right”. The psychological space allowed by tolerance of people having new and divergent ideas naturally drives further individual creativity and innovation. It also allows the flourishing of the profound pleasure of curiosity about each other and the world outside the affiliation.

When I can love who and what I love as well as be curious about who and what I am curious about, I live in a culture in which there is little tension between my desire to go my own way and to belong where I choose to belong. In this information age we now must come to terms with the overload of differences that we never had to face in the hunter/gatherer groupings that is our genetic heritage. Today I am exposed to so many more ways to look at life as compared to even the culture in which I grew up sixty years ago. Yes, I had television but at best, only 4 channels. The news was homogenized and opinion was reserved for the clearly distinguished editorial sections of all public media. I live in a very different world today, where opinion-makers are always trolling for me to affiliate with them.

It is surely an exciting time to be alive but finding my own voice in the cacophony of carefully crafted “messaging” gets harder and harder. If we can give each other the attention and time to think through where each of us stands, there is the opportunity to derive great pleasure to belong to a particular affiliation that I choose autonomously. May each of us find such groups, families, friends, and loved ones to belong with and to!

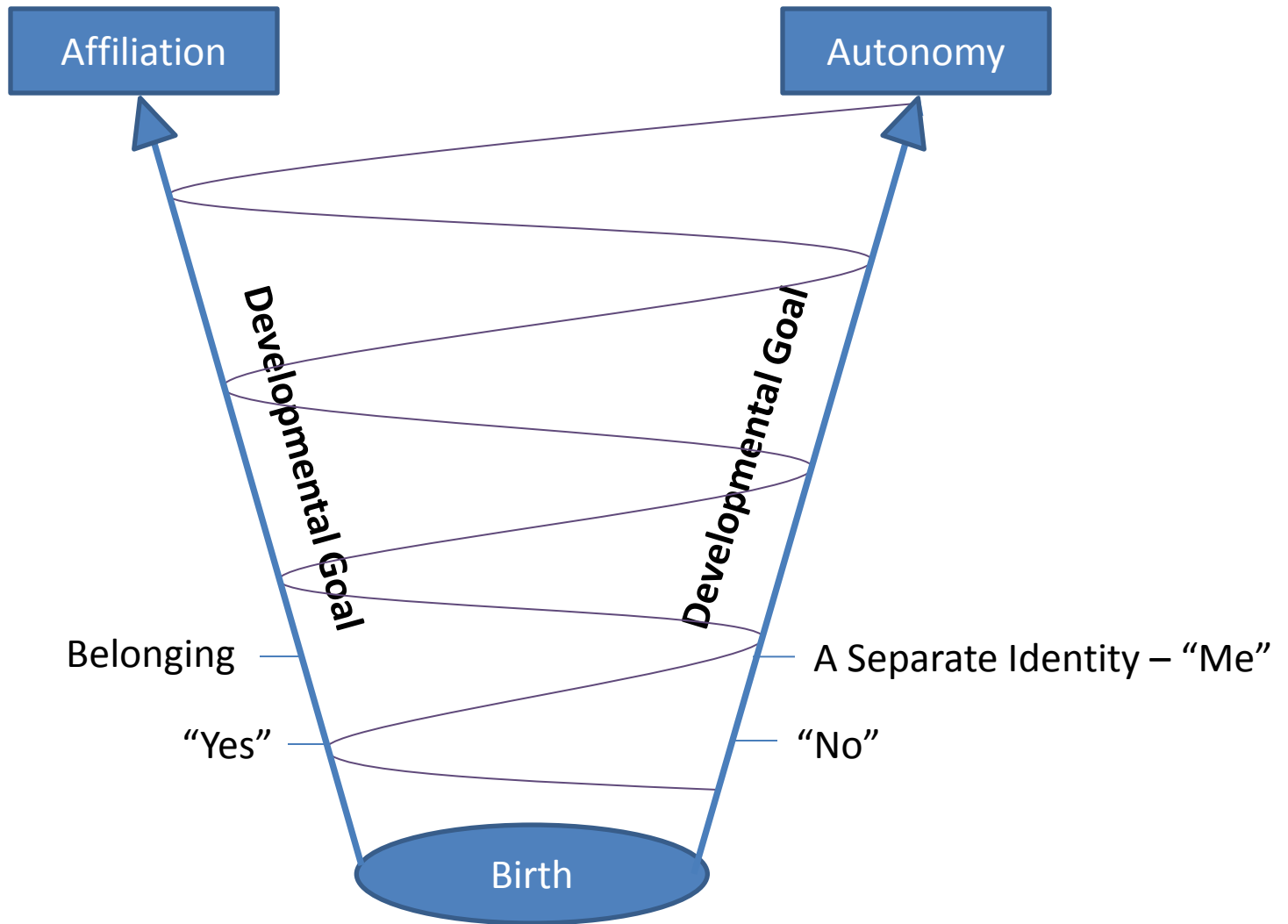
Healthy Personal and Family Development

Diagram 1



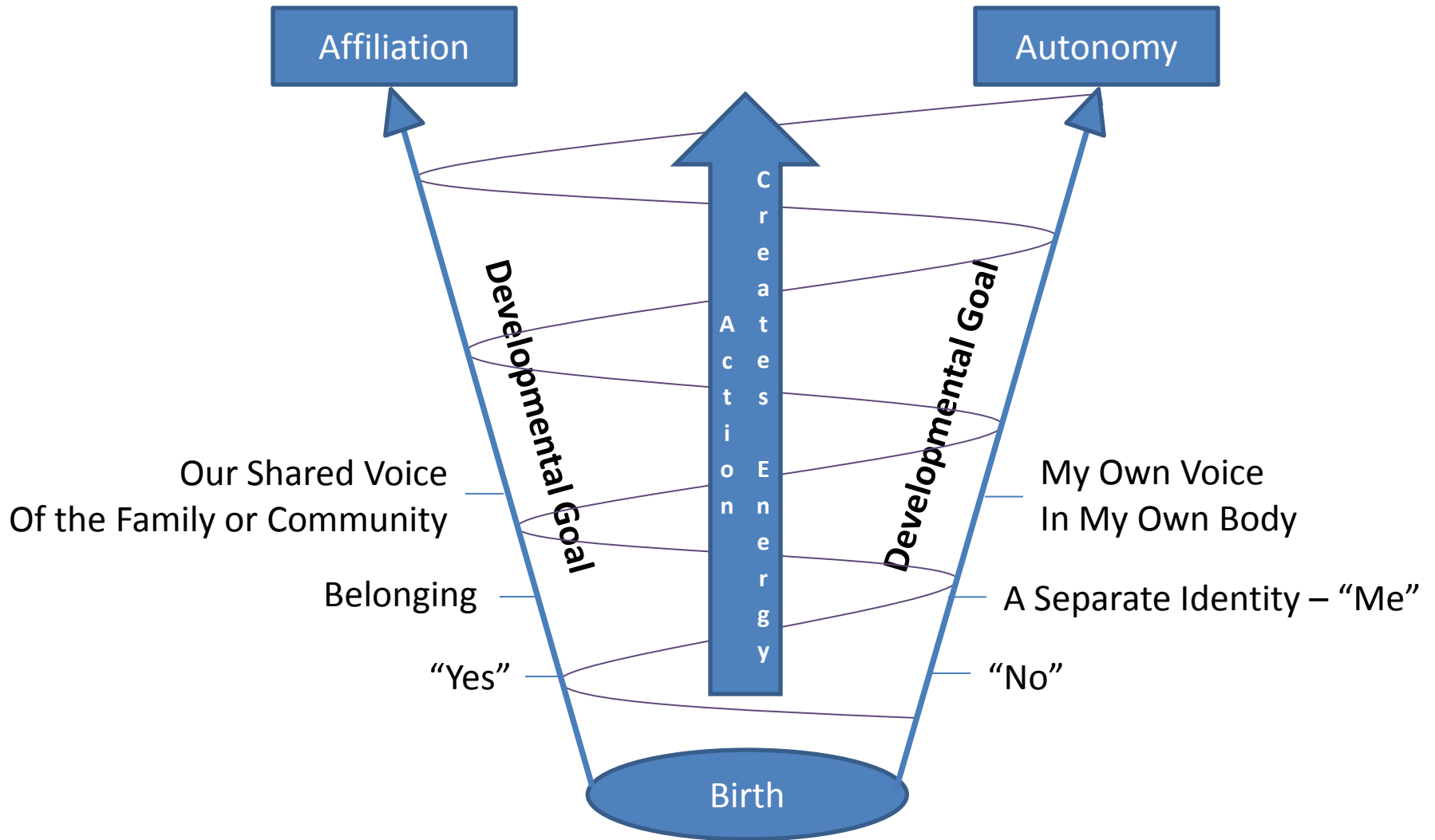
Healthy Personal and Family Development

Diagram 2



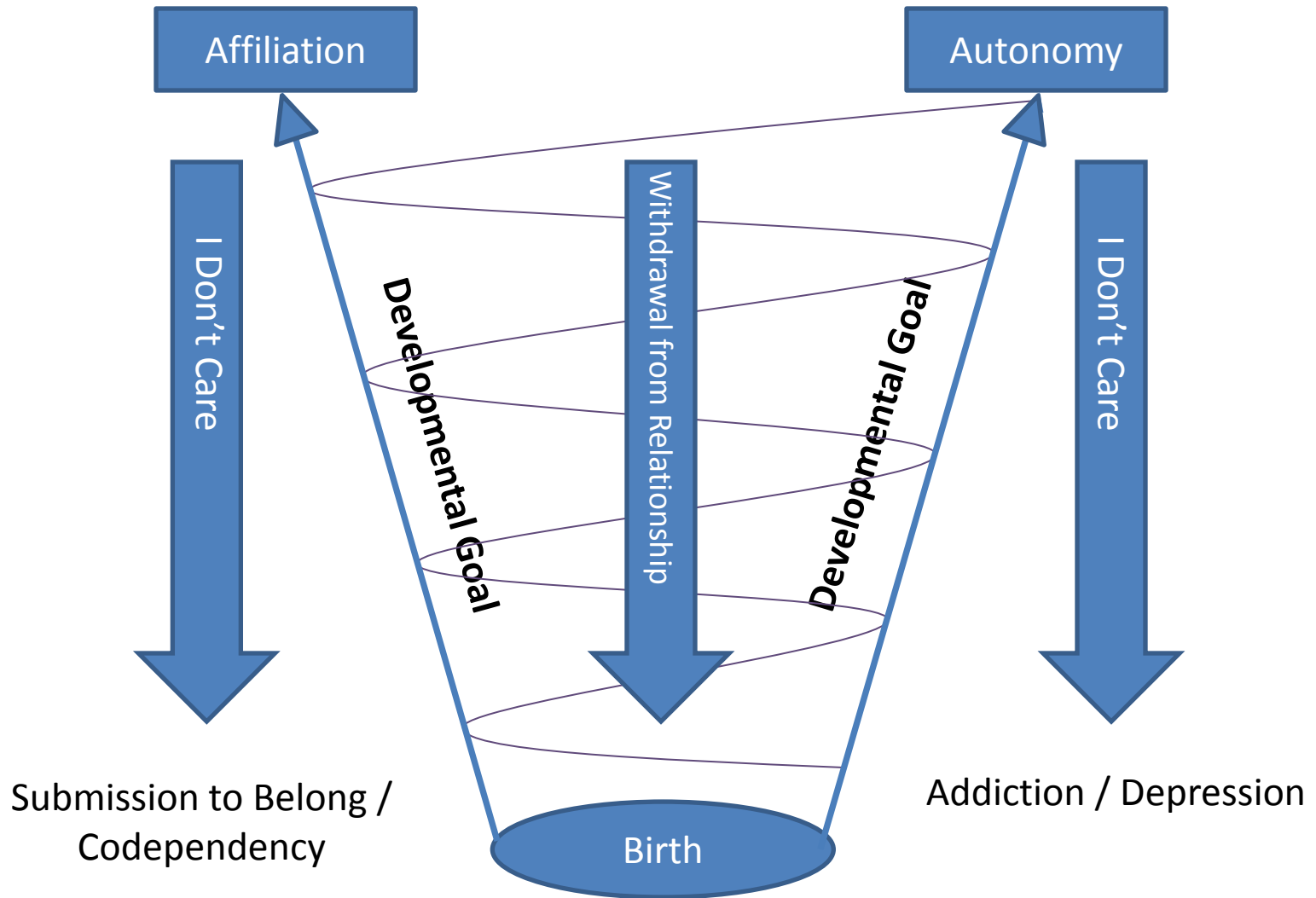
Healthy Personal and Family Development

Diagram 3



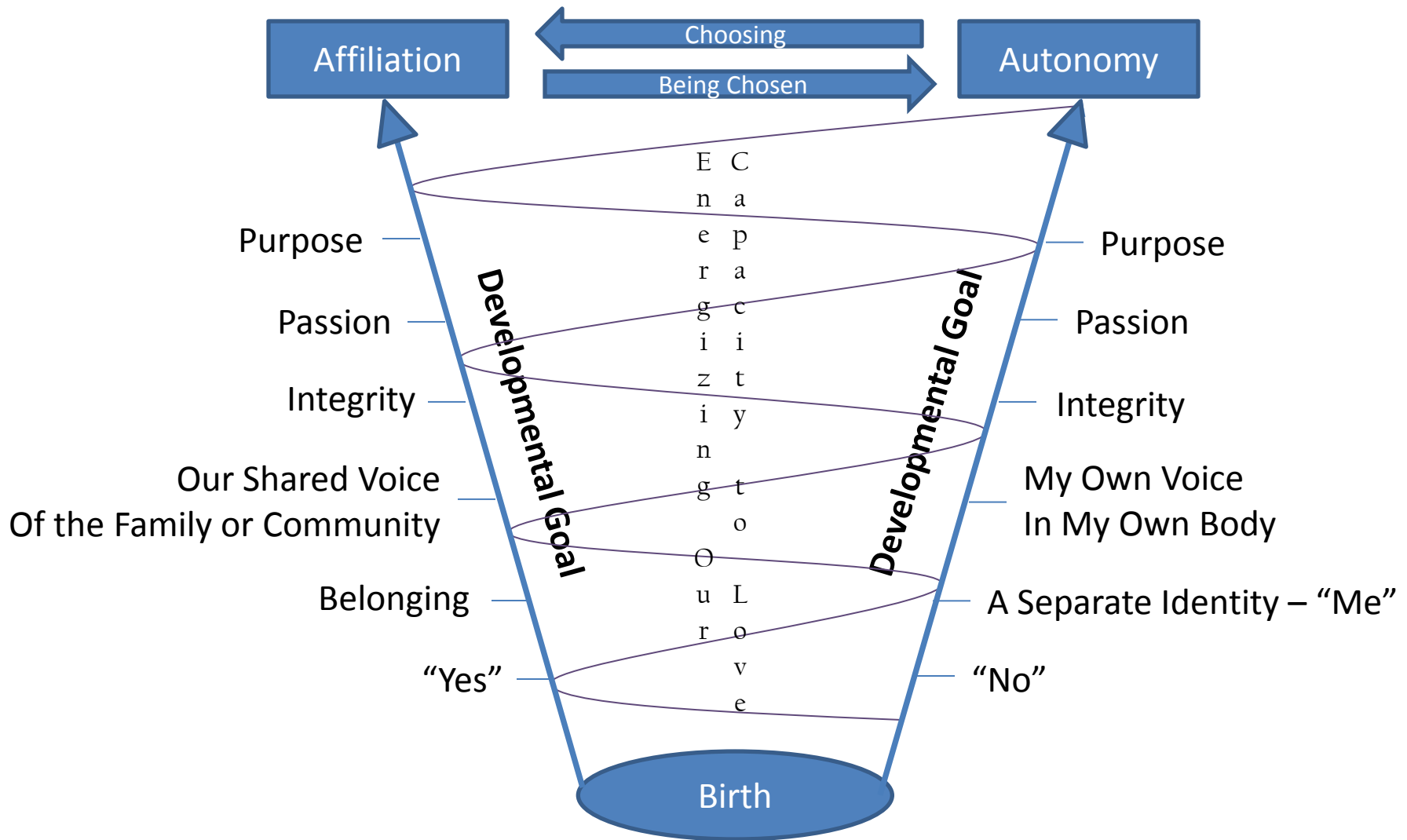
Healthy Personal and Family Development

Diagram 4



Healthy Personal and Family Development

Diagram 5



Healthy Personal and Family Development

Diagram 6

